

ROADS

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A FEW WORDS WITH

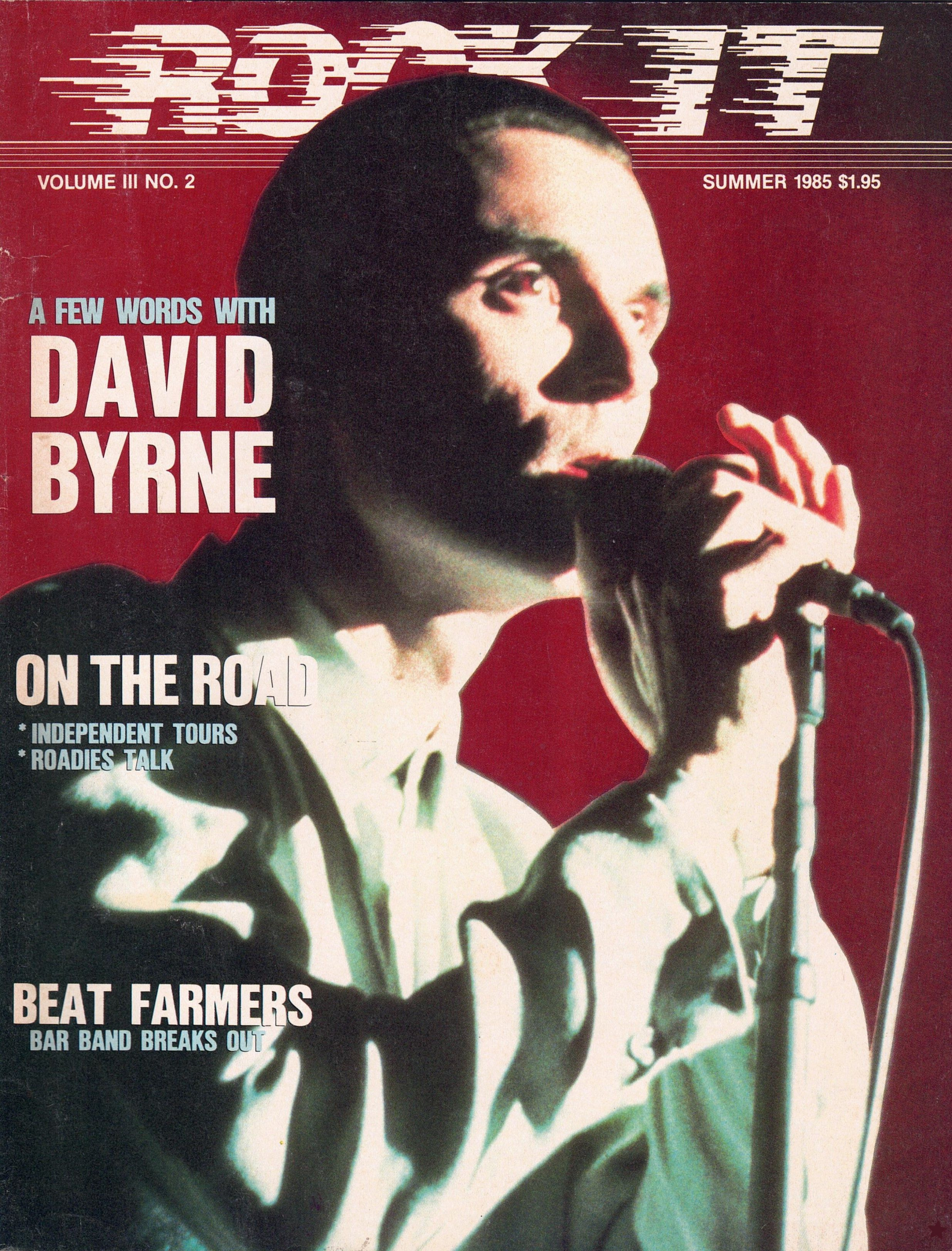
DAVID BYRNE

ON THE ROAD

- * INDEPENDENT TOURS
- * ROADIES TALK

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BIG IDEAS

FROM A TALKING HEAD.
A FEW WORDS WITH
DAVID BYRNE

by Jeff Silberman

David Byrne may be a man of few words, but his actions speak volumes. The 33-year-old leader of the Talking Heads has accomplished more in less than a decade than most contemporary musicians are lucky to attempt in a lifetime. Fresh out of the Rhode Island School of Design, Byrne formed the Talking Heads just as New York's punk scene exploded in 1976-77. Unlike their peers, however, the Talking Heads created innovative music that could appeal to more than just the music critic intelligentsia and the "hip" alternative music cult. When the Heads' sound evolved into funk-tinged rock, their popularity accelerated to gold-record status. Last year's release of their in-concert movie, *Stop Making Sense*, perfectly illustrates a group that has deservedly garnered public acclaim without compromising its unique creativity.

Achieving and sustaining that career alone would be sufficient for most artists, but it's only a tangent of David Byrne's talent. He produced records for the B-52s and Fun Boy Three; he directed almost all of the T. Heads' videos. The singer/guitarist is also quite fond of collaboration. With avant garde composer/producer Brian Eno, he made the album *My Life in The Bush Of Ghosts*, which combined torrid rock, funk, Middle Eastern and African rhythms with taped vocalizations of things like evangelistic sermons, exorcisms, and talk show banter.



DAVID BYRNE

continued from page 14

Byrne is also fond of collaborating in ambitious theatrical productions. He composed the music for *The Catherine Wheel*, an evening-length dance work choreographed by Twyla Tharp. Most recently, he created and recorded the score to *the Knee Plays*, a series of short plays designed to be set between the 15 fully staged scenes of Robert W. Wilson's epic avant garde opera, *the CIVIL warS*.

Then there's a budding film career; Byrne is embarking on his first dramatic acting role as a man of the cloth in *Dead End Kids: The History Of Nuclear Power*. And to top it all off, this phone interview was conducted during a short break in the recording of the Talking Heads' new album, which won't be released until later this year.

You'd think that David Byrne would have plenty to talk about, yet he seemed somewhat secretive about his unfinished projects. Nor was he extremely garrulous when discussing his completed work; he answered questions thoughtfully, but usually in only a few words.

Although he was in the midst of finishing up the Heads' latest album, his mind seemed to be on *the Knee Plays*, the soundtrack album of which has just been released on the jazz-oriented ECM label. Byrne initially met composer Robert Wilson in Tokyo in 1981, where they talked about the possi-

bility of collaborating on *the CIVIL warS*. "We agreed to talk about it at length in New York," Byrne recalled. "There, he came and saw us perform in 1983. We talked about it some more, and the end result was that I agreed to collaborate with him on a section of *CIVIL warS*. It was a series of small acts entitled *the Knee Plays*."

Byrne joined a Tokyo workshop of the plays in April of that year and began composing the music. The concept of the plays was then formulated by Wilson, Byrne and Adelle Lutz. The title comes from the theatrical phrase, which are divertissements or "joints" between two scenes that require massive scene changes. In this context, *the Knee Plays* form an independent, episodic cycle thematically related to the apocalyptic visions of the main opera.

the Knee Plays, which premiered at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota on April 25, are comprised of 13 separate scenes. The plot line is both a substory to *the CIVIL warS*, where each scene (or play) serves as an introduction to the longer scene that follows, and by itself, a separate story. It begins with a man reading a book in a tree, and from there it develops into the tree falling down that becomes a cabin; people also build a boat from it and sail off; a bird takes a man off the boat and flies away; the boat is beached; people write graffiti on it; it sails off again only to be partially sunk by cannon fire; the floating cabin lands

in Japan and Admiral Perry gets out to greet the fisherman with a puppet show; the boat's hull sinks only to be later pulled from the water; it winds up in a tropical jungle, where people discover it, read the graffiti, and assemble a book; a man reads the book in a library, where it becomes a tree again. Obviously, the plot shouldn't be compared to *Death Of A Salesman*, yet there is a definite cyclical nature to the chain of events.

Because the action takes place during the Civil War, Byrne decided to use instruments which were commonly used during that time. He settled on using horns; they were loud enough to drown out the scene changes going on behind *the Knee Plays* and transportable enough to be played on a platform and be set up and dismantled quickly. Musically he claimed to be inspired by traditional American jazz and gospel, particularly that of New Orleans marching bands. "I rehearsed some of the material with the Dirty Dozen Brass Band in New Orleans last year, but it didn't work out," he said. "They were just my inspiration. I used players in Los Angeles. I just wanted to present it as it was, as brass music."

However, Byrne's lyrics for each play are wholly different from the action on stage. For one *Knee Play*, he wrote "Social Studies," where Byrne believes that if he ate the food of a particular area, he would eventually become just

continued on page 25

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DAVID BYRNE

continued from page 22

like its inhabitants. "I felt a great desire to walk off with someone else's groceries," he talk/sings, "so I could study them at length. As though if I ate their groceries I would become that person . . . We might find ourselves going to the same places . . . Reading the same books . . . Wearing the same clothes . . . Getting sick at the same time . . . Working at the same job . . . Living identical lives as long as the groceries lasted."

"It's kind of in keeping with his theatre production," Byrne explained. "The words and sometimes other elements are layered on top of one another, but there isn't an obvious reference from one to the other. I organized the songs to the plays a little bit, but mostly I did it intuitively. There wasn't a real plan to it."

When asked to compare his collaboration with Wilson to his previous work with Tharp, he replied, "The one big difference is that this music is performed live, which is a pretty big difference. I had to write music that didn't rely on sound effects and studio things."

The Catherine Wheel would've gone through further changes if Byrne had the time to rework the music for the video. "A play changes when it's re-done specifically for a different medium," he noted. "*The Catherine Wheel* was changed for the video because it wasn't specifically created for that medium. I didn't get around to changing the music for the video, but in other cases, ideally, I'd do the music designed for the video medium."

Byrne enjoys collaborative efforts, be they solely on musical projects or in conjunction with an artist in a different field. For the collaboration to work, "One would hope that there's some kind of mutual respect from both parties," he said. "And both parties are willing to learn from the other in some discipline outside of their own, even though it might affect something you're more familiar with. In *the Knee Plays*, often I would change the music to tailor it to fit the staging. With Twyla Tharp, I would tailor rhythms to fit the dancing. It worked the other way around, too. Some things that happened visually were keyed to what was happening in the music."

He also admitted that collaboration has a telling effect on the way he writes songs. "It's real different than just writing the songs myself. Although I think *Knee Plays* works as a record, at the time I was thinking about the visual element. It's very difficult to write like that because the elements really have to work together and not overtake the other. On a regular album, none of that comes into effect. It's just whatever

works for the songs."

The lyrics to *the Knee Plays* are not too unlike the lyrics of Talking Heads' songs or the copy in the pamphlet that came with the *Stop Making Sense* soundtrack. Yet Byrne hesitated when asked if his inspiration comes from within or from external circumstances. "Gosh, a little bit of both," he replied. "I put the two together. As a writer, I guess I'm more emotional than intellectual." And of his wry sense of humor? "I think that comes pretty naturally."

Byrne has composed almost all of the songs for the Talking Heads (except for a cover like Al Green's "Take Me To The River"), and even though the Heads' videos are considered to be some of the most creative and innovative work around, he denied that he writes songs with a visual picture in mind. "It has no effect on my songwriting at all," he stated. "Sometimes I might have something in mind if it's done specifically for a play or a dance piece, but when it's just for an album, no, not at all. I probably thought about what it'd be like in our live show during the early stages of the band, but that was because we were performing long before we went into a studio."

The growth of the Talking Heads as a live entity perfectly mirrors its creative growth on record. When the Heads started touring the country to support its debut album and *More Songs About Buildings And Food*, they were a quartet playing tightly structured, usually edgy music. As the frontman, Byrne was anything but flamboyant. He sang stiffly, appearing so tightly wound that it suited songs like "Psycho Killer" and "Tentative Decisions" to a T.

With *Fear of Music*, Byrne began to supplement that intense neurotic edge with funky rhythms, highlighted in "Life During Wartime." The funk groove influence mushroomed in *Remain in Light* and continued with their most recent and most popular album, *Speaking In Tongues*, and its hit single, "Burning Down The House." On stage, the band's creative growth was illustrated by the incorporation of an extra guitarist, keyboardist, percussionist, and backup singers. This allowed Byrne the freedom to concentrate and magnify his eccentric yet compelling stage persona.

"It came gradually," he said. "I became real comfortable (on stage) about three and a half years ago; I'm not sure where we were playing. The new musicians had a lot to do with it; part of the decision to enlarge the band was based on that feeling. Now I'll probably have to abandon it."

Their 1983 tour, shot for the *Stop Making Sense* film, exemplified the

band's evolution and development. The concert began with Byrne on stage alone, playing acoustic guitar to "Psycho Killer." With each succeeding song, another member of the band would come on stage and perform. The sound gradually grew until the full ensemble was playing a rich, highly danceable brew of rock, pop and funk.

"Once we got that on film, I realized that I can't do that anymore," Byrne declared. "The film is like a time capsule, which is great for us. Fortunately for people who missed the tour, they can go see the film."

"Certainly I'm comfortable with it (his persona), but I feel I should make some pretty drastic changes because I don't want to get stuck in a rut by doing the same thing," he continued. "I haven't figured out what the changes will be. I don't have any idea of how it (the next tour) will be done because it's like a year in the future. I'm not even thinking about that yet."

Right now, David Byrne is busy putting the finishing touches on *Little Creatures*, the next Talking Heads album. (He interrupted his work at sequencing the songs for this interview.)

"Almost all of it was written after *Stop Making Sense*, except for some words that I found in my files. There probably is a common thread in the album, although I don't know what it is yet. Sometimes I had a definite idea for the earlier albums, but in many cases I wasn't aware of it until afterwards."

Although he refrained from revealing too much about the new album, Byrne did note that the band is back to the original foursome and its dance groove direction has been somewhat abandoned for a return to more "conventional" song construction. Apparently, he still finds a freshness and enjoyment in playing with the original members. "Quite often there's little surprises that make it worth going on," he exclaimed.

Once the album is out, Byrne will return to some unfinished film work, including *True Stories*, which he scripted and will also direct. "I'm going to do something completely different again, but I don't want to talk about that just yet. Certainly it's a little bit more difficult when you have more people's schedules to work out and get them all in synch, but that's OK, it's worth it," he concluded.

In all, it seems that David Byrne enjoys walking an artistic tightrope, balancing the unpredictability of new, creative challenges and the mechanics involved in the completion of his work. "It's a fine line between the craft of it and of keeping a human and emotional what-not," he asserted. "And I can't tell which way I'm going."